




Karate, capoeira and MMA: a phenomenological approach to the process of starting a fight

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Abstract

In sports studies, the body of research focussing on combat sports has developed, but so far few studies regarding the experience of starting a fight. In order to comprehend the process of starting a fight, this study aims to investigate and describe it through both a comparative and phenomenological approach of Brazilian karate, capoeira and mixed martial arts (MMA) practitioners ($n = 11, 7, 11$, respectively). Semi-structured interviews were conducted and in the analysis we used a phenomenological perspective. Most of the karatekas described the distance adjustment and bowing to their opponent as the beginning of the combat. Capoeiristas highlighted the sound of music and the *roda*, referring to the way they organize themselves to start fighting. MMA athletes commonly described the beginning of the fight as when they start the *camp*, from the weigh-in or the octagon entrance. Using the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the process of beginning a fight can be understood as a relationship between a bodily consciousness and the world. The findings in this paper concur with the phenomenological understanding, according to which actions are not seen as randomly executed: instead they are pre-reflexively and corporeally understood, as well as situated within a specific context; this is illustrated in the manner a fight within each modality seems to begin somewhat differently, according to the specific modality in question. These results help us comprehend the beginning of the fight in which body and world are constantly intertwined. Future directions include comprehension of the fighting experience as a whole, understanding the perception and movement of these fighters through the entire combat, and enhancing phenomenological studies regarding bodily experiences.

Keywords: Combat sports; martial arts; phenomenology; karate; capoeira; MMA.

Karate, capoeira y MMA: una aproximación fenomenológica al proceso de iniciar el combate

Resumen

Existe, en las ciencias del deporte, una presencia creciente de estudios sobre deportes de combate, aunque aún son poco los centrados en la experiencia del inicio de la lucha. Para comprender dicha experiencia, el objetivo de este estudio fue investigarla y describirla desde una perspectiva comparativa y fenomenológica, en una muestra de practicantes brasileños de karate, capoeira y artes marciales mixtas (MMA) ($n = 11, 7, 11$, respectivamente). Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas, y en el análisis se utilizó una perspectiva fenomenológica. La mayoría de los karatekas describió el ajuste de la distancia y el saludo al rival como marcadores del comienzo del combate. Los capoeiristas destacaron el sonido de la música y la *roda*, refiriéndose al modo en que se organizan para luchar, donde todos participan. Los atletas de MMA normalmente describieron el comienzo de la lucha cuando comienzan el *camp*, desde el pesaje o la entrada o al octágono. Utilizando la fenomenología de Merleau-Ponty, el proceso de iniciar una lucha puede entenderse como una relación entre una conciencia corporal y el mundo. Los hallazgos en este trabajo coinciden en una comprensión fenomenológica,

Karate, capoeira e MMA: uma perspectiva fenomenológica do processo de começar a lutar

Resumo

Nas ciências do esporte, pesquisas com foco em esportes de combate têm sido crescentes, mas ainda são poucos os estudos com relação à experiência de se começar uma luta. Para que este processo seja compreendido, esta pesquisa tem seu foco em investigar e descrevê-lo através de uma perspectiva comparativa e fenomenológica em praticantes brasileiros de karate, capoeira e artes marciais mistas (MMA) ($n = 11, 7, 11$, respectivamente). Entrevistas semiestructuradas foram realizadas e contou-se com uma análise de cunho fenomenológico. A maioria dos karatekas descreveu o ajuste da distância e o cumprimento ao oponente como marcadores do início do combate. Já os capoeiristas ressaltaram o som da música e a *roda*, se referindo ao modo como eles se organizam para lutar, em que todos participam. Atletas de MMA comumente descreveram o início da luta quando começam o *camp*, a partir da pesagem ou da entrada no octógono. Com base na fenomenologia de Merleau-Ponty, pontua-se que o processo de iniciar uma luta pode ser entendido pela relação entre consciência corpórea e mundo. Os achados neste trabalho convergem para uma compreensão

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según la cual las acciones no se entienden como algo ejecutado al azar: al contrario, se entienden pre-reflexiva y corporalmente, así como se sitúan en un contexto específico; esto se evidencia en que los combates se inician de forma diferentes según cada modalidad específica en cuestión. Estos resultados nos ayudan a comprender el comienzo de la lucha, donde cuerpo y mundo están constantemente entrelazados. Futuras perspectivas incluyen la comprensión de la experiencia de la lucha como un todo, para entender la percepción y movimiento de estos luchadores a lo largo de todo el combate, fortaleciendo en corpus de los estudios centrados en la fenomenología y las experiencias corporales.

Palabras clave: Deportes de combate; artes marciales; fenomenología; kárate; capoeira; MMA.

fenomenológica, segundo a qual ações não são entendidas como algo executado aleatoriamente: elas são pré-reflexivamente e corporalmente entendidas e realizadas, bem como situadas em um contexto específico; isto é ilustrado no modo como a luta em cada uma das modalidades tem início de formas diferentes. Estes resultados nos auxiliam a compreender o começo da luta de maneira em que corpo e mundo estão constantemente entrelaçados. Direções futuras incluem a compreensão da experiência de lutar como um todo, entendendo percepção e movimento destes lutadores ao longo de todo o combate, fortalecendo os estudos em fenomenologia e experiências corporais.

Palavras-chave: Esportes de combate; artes marciais; fenomenologia; karate; capoeira; MMA.

1. Introduction

Considering the “fight” as an object of study, several works that use different perspectives, and originate from disciplines, such as psychology, physical education, sociology and philosophy, currently exist (Barreira, 2014; Figueiredo, 2009). In sport psychology and other sports sciences, there has been increasing research interest in martial arts and combat sports (MA&CS¹) in general, but so far, this literature has paid limited attention to participants’ experiences of starting a fight. Recently karate, capoeira and MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) have been separately studied using a phenomenological approach, which is primed to understand the fighting phenomenon through the lived experience of the fighters and coaches (Barreira, 2013, 2014; Bassetti, Telles & Barreira, 2016; Channon & Jennings, 2014; Downey, 2002; Hogeveen, 2011; Jensen, Roman, Shaft & Wrisberg, 2013; Telles & Barreira, 2016; Vaitinen, 2017; Valério & Barreira, 2016a and b). This perspective seems to broaden and complement traditional studies concerning not only general sports psychology but also the field of MA&CS-studies. This investigation, based on a study of karate, capoeira and MMA, using a comparative and phenomenological approach, seeks to contribute to the phenomenological perspective to MA&CS, and to the most recent studies in this area. These three modalities were chosen due to the findings in existing research (Telles & Barreira, 2016) which views them as very different from one another. These differences will be illustrated by the discussion in the next few paragraphs. Karate can be seen as an Eastern modality, while capoeira can be represented as an Afro-Brazilian one, and MMA can be considered as a contemporary modality of fighting through a hybrid mixture of different MA&CS. As we examine these modalities through a phenomenological lens, we are more interested in comprehending *how* these differences may appear in the practitioners’ experiences, than trying to confirm them.

Karate here is understood as an Eastern martial art, and especially related to Japanese culture. Although it was originally developed in Okinawa Island when this region did not belong to Japan, our focus is on the era of modern karate, which began when Funakoshi sensei went to Tokyo and started to give karate classes there. Karate can be translated as “empty hands”, highlighting the absence of weapons during the fight (Barreira, 2013; Reid & Croucher, 1983). The idea of emptiness is not only related to the body itself but also refers to a mental process, in which the karateka tries to achieve the state of “no-mind” to fight properly, not mentally anticipating the fight, which means without feeling anger, sadness or happiness, for example (Barreira, 2013; Funakoshi & Nakasone,

¹ This term is used here to indicate the domain of corporal fights, sometimes considered as martial arts, combat sports, fighting sports, among others. Precise definition of these terms is not easily found and recent attempts to define them (especially the term “martial arts”) have been done based on a phenomenological perspective (Barreira, 2017a). This is why we chose to follow the IMACSSS (International Martial Arts and Combat Sports Scientific Society) designation, in order to consider these different, yet imprecise, definitions. Also, as the domain of MA&CS is diverse and heterogeneous, we tried to follow the recommendations in Pérez-Gutiérrez, Gutiérrez-García and Escobar-Molina (2011), in order to contribute to a standardization of these terms.



2005; Reid & Croucher, 1983). The “no-mind”, or “empty mind”, if we consider it as a development of the “empty hands” concept, helps the fighter be more accurate in his/her movements. It is often considered that a good hit in a karate combat must be fast and strong (fatal), always considering the possibility of life versus death, even if it does not correspond to the ethos of contemporary MA&CS, especially in urban contexts. The idea of a perfect hit could be further understood as a myth, which relates to the origins of karate, rather than a reality of combat practice (Barreira, 2013). It is also important to note that karate has been recently included in the Olympic Games (2020) and therefore the consequences of a more sportive and Western fighting ethos are yet to be determined. Karate is also known for its variety of styles (Shotokan, Goju-Ryu, Shito-Ryu, Shorin-Ryu, Wado-Ryu, Kyokushinkai, among others); in addition, karate fights may vary, ranging from the traditional forms to the more sportive ones. Drawing from existing phenomenological studies on karate (Barreira, 2006, 2013), it is already possible to understand this modality of combat not only in terms of technique, but also through the concept of intentionality, which is to say that karate can be understood by its elementary characteristics of moving the body with the intention to fight: empty hands and empty mind, and with the intention to achieve a perfect hit.

Capoeira, on the other hand, is a Brazilian fighting modality, which is also referred to as play, a game, and a dance, to name but a few of its other designations (Valério & Barreira, 2016a). According to Downey (2002), capoeira can be seen as a “‘blurred genre’, combining elements of dance, folklore, martial art, sport, ritual, and training for unarmed (and sometimes armed) fighting. [...] practiced, learned, and used in diverse contexts: from folklore performances for tourists and physical education classes, to athletic competitions, and for self-defence” (p. 490). The practice of capoeira is historically related to Brazilian colonial history of slavery and it was prohibited from 1890 to 1937. Even today, capoeira is performed in such a way that the fighter attempts to hide the combat aspect at all times. Both the music and the *roda* have been examined as important features of capoeira by studies using a phenomenological approach (Downey, 2002; Valério & Barreira, 2016b). Music is always present in this practice, and the body moves in the same rhythm as the songs. Along with these movements, the rhythm also helps the fighters escape from the attacks by moving their bodies. This ability is commonly seen in capoeira circles (known in Brazilian Portuguese as *roda*), a formation of participants which favours the capoeiristas playing together. Since 2008, the *roda* has been recognized as part of Brazilian cultural heritage by IPHAN (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional) (Vidor & Reis, 2013) and it is also now on the UNESCO representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity (UNESCO, 2014). There is some controversy regarding the attempts to promote it in a competition format, mainly because it is not a sporting fight, although some would argue that capoeira has already been undergoing a sportization process (Correio, Bortoleto & Paoliello, 2012; Rego, 1968). Furthermore, similar to karate, the capoeira fights can range from the traditional to more sportive forms, and also vary depending its stylistic origins in *angola* or *regional* style.

The third modality of combat; Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), refers to a contemporary form of sports fighting, which draws from a hybrid combination of distinct MA&CS. Before the emergence of MMA organizations such as UFC and Bellator (Holthuysen, 2011), similar fights were organized under the name of “no-holds barred” fighting (*vale-tudo* was the original name, created in Brazil), which referred to the scarce number of rules governing the competitions (Heilbron and Van Bottenburg, 2006; Sanchez-Garcia & Malcolm, 2010). Unlike the “no-holds barred” (NHB) style contests, these fights are now governed by a complex set of rules and they are organized to look for the best MMA fighter, rather than the best fight modality. In NHB, two fighters from two different modalities were used to combat and see which fight modality would emerge victorious. In MMA, the fighters commonly integrate distinct fighting styles in order to create their own “game”, referring to the combination of skills, techniques and strategies guiding their approach to the fight (Awi, 2012; Telles, 2013). In contrast to karate and capoeira, MMA developed with a more explicit competitive focus, and since its early days had developed into a sporting spectacle, involving a lot of media, marketing and money (Santos, Tainsky, Schmidt & Shim, 2013). In the existing research and the public sphere, there have been many debates around violence and aggression in MMA/NHB, exploring whether this modality was illustrative of a process of de-sportization as MMA was in fact originally banned by many US states (van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). However, its exponential growth across the globe in the past two decades has begun to solidify its position as a ‘legitimate’

combat sport and there have even been proposals to include it in the Olympic Games (Curran, 2018). In addition, further research has emerged to examine role and consequences of *violence* and aggression in MMA– not only from the perspective of the fighters but also that of the spectators' (Cheever, 2009; Spencer, 2009; Sanchez Garcia & Malcolm, 2010). In addition, phenomenological research by Barreira (2017a and b) has sought to comprehend how this *violence* is viewed based on the experience of the fighters. In a phenomenological analysis on the topic of the violence, Barreira (2017b) introduces the concept of *sensible norm*, which considers the aesthetic dimension in the intersubjective experiences in MA&CS, in which violence should be recognized from a sensible affectivity, by the fighter's experience, not from outsiders' or spectators' observations of the fighters' interactions.

The findings of the study presented here are part of a larger project, which proposes to develop a phenomenological and comparative comprehension of combat in karate, capoeira and MMA among Brazilian fighters. During the interviews from the larger project, it was discovered that the participants described the process of beginning a fight very differently. Thus, in order to comprehend the process of starting a fight, this paper aims to examine and present these accounts of karate, capoeira and MMA practitioners through a comparative and phenomenological approach. It is important to highlight that the fight phenomenon is understood here with reference to the concept of *corporal fighting* (Barreira, 2017a), in which:

(it) does not refer to any form of institutionalized physical confrontation regulated by external rules that control the conduct of the participants and which involves the criteria of victory and defeat. [...] The first fundamental distinction that surfaces in *corporal fighting* is the mutual availability of the participants: both are willing to fight, and both are aware of each other's willingness to fight. [...] The second fundamental characteristic is that *corporal fighting* finds motivation in itself – namely, in the challenge of overcoming the opponent while avoiding being overcome (p. 357-358).

The aim here is to provide some examples from the experiences of fighters who were interviewed, whether their fighting experiences were related to training or sparring, although there were also some accounts of competitive fights which emerged during the interviews. Therefore, the concept of *corporal fighting*, the essence of which lies in the intentionality of the body towards the combat structure, understood as an objective-subjective phenomenon, is of particular relevance here. Barreira underscores how this ambiguity is seen especially in combat moments once:

Those who have an opponent's body as their target also have, simultaneously, their own body as the target of their adversary. [...] the purpose is not just to strike or stop the opponent's body, as the target, but also to avoid having one's own body hit or stopped as the target of one's adversary (2017a, p. 361).

Obviously, the above can happen in different ways and in different types of fights, where practitioners aim to restrict the movement of the opponents and frustrate their intentions by displacement, blocking, grappling, submission, holding, kicking, striking to mention a few examples. This is why we focus our attention here specifically on three different modalities: karate, capoeira and MMA. In addition, it is also important to differentiate the *corporal fight* from a brawl, a 'playful fight' or even self-defence, because for example the latter implies an anticipation or avoidance of "situations in which there is a risk of violence or when this risk is unavoidable, to be cautious and, ultimately, defend themselves physically. [...] defending from a physical attack is not a 'corporal fight'", although some resources from *corporal fight* could be used" (Barreira, 2017a, p. 363). Moreover, the focal point of this concept is the embodied intentionality during a fight. Mainly, the idea of self-defence "embraces feelings, attitudes, and behaviours related to precautions against risk" (p. 364) while the idea of the *corporal fight* focusses solely on the intention to fight, not including such practices as *kata* in karate and *maculelê* in capoeira, for example. Thus, our pursuit of comparing and phenomenologically comprehending the process of starting a fight in karate, capoeira and MMA is framed by the concept of a *corporal fight*. This also why we use the term fighter for karate, capoeira or and MMA practitioners, whether they are taking part in competitions or not.

2. Method: describing a phenomenological approach

This study seeks to develop a phenomenological and comparative understanding of the process of starting a fight among Brazilian karate, capoeira and MMA fighters and therefore phenomenological perspective is present throughout this investigation with particular emphasis on the method. As discussed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000), phenomenology is only accessible through a phenomenological method, and it is not a theory or simply a method that we can choose to use, but it is rather a particular lens through which we can view the world and phenomena around us. In order to do this, our approach is guided by the concept of “bracketing”, which as defined by Husserl (1931), means an attitudinal stepping back from our taken for granted assumptions of the world, through practices of *epochè* and reduction. Although, as McNarry et. al (2018) note these three are often utilised interchangeably (even by Husserl himself) to refer to this critical attitude. At its core, bracketing is about trying to grasp the structure of the things in the lifeworld, through lived experiences, an attitude and a movement to go “back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 1931). In this study, it guides the enquiry in the sense that we try to grasp the structure of the beginning of the fight across these three modalities of combat (Karate, Capoeira and MMA) and maintain a critical perspective in relation to our situated assumptions and pre-conceptions of the subject matter.

The rationale for utilising qualitative methods of investigation here is underpinned by the attention of empiric-phenomenological research on description and lived experiences, aspects of the world around us which are best captured by this particular research design. However, as noted above, and in line with the phenomenological method, we consider phenomenology as a point of view and not simply a theory or a method alone. This perspective allows us to constantly ask questions about the world of the fighters within these three modalities of combat, “not considering as acquired anything that men or scientists think they know²” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000, p. 11). This is why the description is of such fundamental importance to phenomenological enquiry such as this. We begin with descriptions provided by the participants, allowing things to appear to us, instead of supposing we already know them. This is important, because as McLeod (2011) argues; it seems the phenomenological tradition is being lost in some empirical research which claim to be phenomenological while phenomenology itself sometimes seems to be only partially understood or utilised to label studies that focus on lived-experience without explicit utilisation of the phenomenological perspective. This is why we highlight the importance of practice of “bracketing” and the centrality of descriptions as guiding concepts in researching lived experiences and structures of experience.

In this study, 29 Brazilian adult fighters were interviewed³ (11 from karate, 7 from capoeira and 11 from MMA). Only one of them was female (karate). These participants had more than 5 years of experience in each modality and they have already taught it or participated in a competition at least once⁴. They were recruited using the *snowballing procedure*, in which we started with a participant who was suitable to participate in the study and then we asked him/her to suggest other potential suitable interviewees. In this study we have only interviewed one female fighter, as she was the only female suggested by the participants within the snowballing strategy utilised. We accept that this is a limitation of this study and something that further research into experiences of female fighters in these modalities could seek to address. The interviews were conducted until we reached the point of data saturation where we were able to grasp the structure of the beginning of each fight modality.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by a Brazilian researcher, MA&CS practitioner⁵, with these fighters, asking them (1) to describe their experience of fighting (“How is the experience

² “Original sentence in Brazilian Portuguese: Não considera como adquirido nada do que os homens ou os cientistas acreditam saber”.

³ In the cities of Fortaleza (most of them) and Ribeirão Preto..

⁴ This study was approved by the Ethics Committee (FFCLRP-USP) in October 22nd, 2015 (CAAE nº 46763815.4.0000.5407). All participants signed the agreement to collaborate in this research.

⁵ First author, she is a karate and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) practitioner, who participated in all phases of the research. The third author, who participated in the conceptual design, data analysis and discussion (also as



of fighting – karate, capoeira, MMA – for you?”); (2) to describe a moment when they realized they could fight (“Was there a moment when you realized you knew how to fight? How was it?”)⁶; and requesting (3) a description of a remarkable fight they participated. These interviews were all audio recorded with the consent of the participants and manually transcribed in verbatim. Their translation to English language was not previously made, but we translated some of the extracts to be used in this paper.

Within a study using the phenomenological methods such as this one, as discussed above, we must consider the implication of this approach in all stages of the study. First and foremost, we must ask ourselves what is the main purpose of these interviews. Overall, what we aim to do, is to phenomenologically comprehend the process of starting a fight in karate, capoeira and MMA. According to Hálak, Jirásek and Nesti (2014), to do this, that is to phenomenologically comprehend a phenomenon, is not to consider the interviews as objective data, or as a collection of particular experiences of each fighter. Instead, comprehending the structure in each modality of combat, by comparing the experiences of these fighters and aiming to identify shared features within them, is the focal point of this approach.

While conducting the interviews, we were aligned with the practice of ‘bracketing’ which guided the focus on the structures of the ‘things themselves’ in this case the structures involved in starting fighting. Furthermore, we sought to maintain critical awareness and analytical distance from the subject matter of fighting as well as the data collection methods. As a result of our situatedness in the world, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000) considered *completely* standing aside our assumptions as an impossibility and for him this incompleteness of *epochè* and reduction, does not make them redundant, but rather, is what this approach is made of (Smith, 2005). However, within this understanding of the phenomenological method, adopting a critical awareness of our assumptions, meanings and interpretations is fundamentally important (McNarry et. al, 2018). In this study, and in the interviews in particular, we are sought to do this through the practice of *suspensive listening* (Barreira, 2017c). Thus the aim of the interviews was to let the interviewees freely speak of something they habitually do; in the case of this research, to let them speak about how they fight. This kind of listening is designed to highlight the attitude of the interviewer, who tries to maintain critical awareness of what he/she might know to allow the experience of the interviewees to emerge and to be comprehended as near as possible to the way they have lived through it. Through semi-structured interviewing, the interviewees are also prompted by the interviewer to speak with reference to their personal experiences, instead of talking about the process of starting a fight more generally in terms of what they already know of it. It is an attempt to access and revisit the lived experience through active listening, trying to set aside the ideas which could influence the comprehension of others, in this case the fighters’, experiences.

During the analysis process, the interviews were read and re-read, in order to identify the moments when the fighters reported the experiences relating to the moment of starting a fight. Throughout this process we sought to maintain critical attitude to try and be aware of our preconceived ideas of the fight in order to try to comprehend the fight experience according to the fighter’s own understanding. We sought to identify the structure of the process of beginning a fight as narrated by each fighter, and then compared these findings using, what Barreira (2017b) calls an *intentional crossing* attitude. This involved not only to identifying the structure of starting a fight in each fighter, but also within each modality, in the case of this study: karate, capoeira and MMA.

Finally, as the structure of each fight began to emerge from the interview accounts, the results were compared to relevant literature in MA&CS and phenomenology such as the works of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000, 1953/2011), which underpin and frame this paper. The preconceived ideas which were previously set aside, were then brought together with the structures which were found in the interview accounts describing the lived experience of the fighters. In this paper, we

the PhD supervisor), he is a karate practitioner. The second author participated in data discussion and writing; she is also a combat sports practitioner (MMA, JKD, Wing Chun). All of the authors contributed with phenomenological and MA&CS expertise.

⁶ This question is linked to an investigation on the learning processes of each fight – which is not the purpose of this paper.

present some extracts of the interviews in order to describe and comprehend them structurally, and subsequently discuss them together with the literature on phenomenology and MA&CS.

It is important to highlight that using a phenomenological perspective in the MA&CS field requires an understanding that is based on pre-reflexive acts, and which involved trying to put these acts into language (Stelter, 2000). This comprehension consists of a reflection about the unreflecting (Barbaras, 2008), which proposes that once the body is moving almost all the time, there is little time to think. As discussed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000), a movement is not only related to what we think about the world, but also to what we can do in it (and through it). This highlights one of the most important aspects of phenomenology relevant to this study: the concept of intentionality, which according to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000) is to say that subject and object are always inextricably connected to one another. However, following this proposition, to phenomenologically comprehend the consciousness we must see it as an act, not only reflexively, but also as inherently embodied. This phenomenological understanding pertains that a movement is never randomly executed, but on the contrary, it is always related to an object and to the world, even if we are not conscious of it (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000.) We simply do it, always engaged in a specific situation (Telles & Barreira, 2017). Thus, we concur that a phenomenological approach can be seen as extremely relevant to the studies not only in MA&CS but also in other situations where bodies are engaged in movement (Andrieu, 2017; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2018; Hogeveen, 2011; Vaittinen, 2017).

3. Entering the *dojo*, the *roda* or the octagon: describing different ways of starting to fight

According to the karatekas, starting a *kumite* (a Japanese word used in karate to refer to the fight moment) includes (1) bowing the judges and the opponent; (2) hearing “*hajime!*” (a Japanese word, commonly used in karate fights, which means “start!”) from the main judge, as an authorization to start the combat; and (3) adjusting their distance from the opponent. They usually described the whole strategy during the fight based on this distance adjustment. This brief description below illustrates that this seems to happen not only in competitions, but also in the most different ways of fighting within karate:

In karate there's a lot of respect to enter in the koto area, which means the fight area. There's the bowing. You bow like three times to go into the fight. To go away, it's the same way. There's a ritual, a discipline. It's not like this... acting like crazy. No. There's a ritual. [...] when the main judge says: “hajime!”, it seems you get in the mood, you start feeling more comfortable in the dojo, the koto, wherever you're fighting.⁷ (K11)⁸

When the distance is being established, the karatekas noted that they study each other, timidly releasing some movements. This period was described as a tense moment. It was usually more reflexive and, gradually, movements replaced, and preceded thoughts. The distance adjustment emerged as a fundamental feature to the fight, because karate is structured as a way of fighting with complete awareness, not only of the fighter himself/herself, but also of the opponent:

when I start the fight, the first thing I worry about is the distance. I establish my guard, in a more defensive than offensive way, and I try to maintain an adequate distance to move. Once I establish a distance, which I note it is in my action range, I... I don't remember to hear anything, hearing is not something that I focus on. I pay so much attention in the opponent's plexus, because I try to get his attitude with my arms and legs. When I establish my action field, my adequate distance, etc, what I try to do is to induct my opponent to move in a way it advantages me. Then, normally a faint. Then, I establish a rhythm of movement, which makes him... let's say I induct him to think he's

⁷ No karate tem todo o respeito pra você entrar no, numa área de, no koto, que é a área de luta, tem o cumprimento. Você cumprimenta, né, você cumprimenta umas três vezes pra entrar pra lutar. Pra sair, do mesmo jeito. Existe todo um ritual, disciplina. Não é assim, você entra feito doido, não. Não. Existe todo um ritual. [...] quando o árbitro diz: “hajime!”, parece assim, que aí você começa a entrar já no clima, você já começa a se ambientar mais dentro do, do, do, do dojo, do koto, onde você tá lutando (K11).

⁸ The quotes of the fighters are in italic type to differ from the quotes in the literature findings.



got my movement to his side [...] I try to make him make a mistake by moving. And then I attack, with an ashibarai, a mawashigeri, a gyakutsuki, a kizamitsuki... It depends on his position⁹ (K4).

The karatekas talked about, and considered waiting and observing the opponent as the beginning of the fight, and how it can be described as a tense moment: “after you’re hit or hit someone, or receive the points or do it, that’s it... you feel more relaxed and you improve the fight”¹⁰ (K11). This sense of feeling relaxed is also related to the feeling of ‘emptiness’, commonly sought by the karatekas. According to Barreira (2006), it allows the fighters to sense the opponent through his/her embodied presence. This intersubjective attitude, to feel touched by the other, helps the karateka to act, react, and even create specific strategies, related to each situation. The other appears to the fighter as a risk, an obstacle which demands attention. Instead of rapidly and offensively moving and attacking, the body of the karateka attentively waits for the best moment to counterattack. This is an extremely cautious approach to the fight. It is clear the karateka avoids moving or exposing himself/herself if there is no decisive reason to do so.

In addition, we also explore the notion of a “perfect hit”. Although it could be better described during the development of the fight, this notion also emerged as a common theme in fighters’ accounts of the beginning of the fight. Different from the idea of killing the opponent with one hit, as previously described in the literature (Barreira, 2013), the idea of perfect hit is understood by the interviewees as a good performed hit or even a trusted one:

I like to be anticipating myself in relation to what he is up to do. I have it in my mind, my idea of hit. I think that it’s not always possible. But when it is, I do it. (K6)¹¹

You must see karate is not a fight in which you use lots of hits with the opponent. Karate is to define in only one hit. (K11)¹²

The above extracts illustrate how the karatekas possess a particular embodied view of a perfect hit, the aim of which is to be a decisive one. When it comes to the idea of this “one hit”, even if it is closer to a traditional comprehension of a karate fight, we also found similar descriptions in the accounts of sportive fighters. They seem to maintain the aspect of a perfect hit, but in a different way, other than killing the opponent with one hit. They commonly described how there were some hits which they could “trust” or rely on: “Where I see a space I can do it without thinking about it [...]. Because this is my trusted strike” (K9)¹³. This trusted strike is, for example, a kick or a punch which they are habituated to perform. These participants also related this feeling of comfort with the idea of utilising just a few complementary strikes try and achieve the perfect hit. Alternatively, some described using them when and where they felt it was possible. This illustrates what Wacquant (1989/2004) describes as ‘corporeal learning’. Much like the boxers in the South Side gym of Wacquants’ ethnographic study ‘Body and Soul’ the karatekas in this study learnt to think about the

⁹ quando eu começo a luta, a primeira coisa que eu me preocupo é a distância, é a distância. Eu estabeleço a minha guarda, muito mais defensiva do que ofensiva, e eu procuro manter uma distância adequada pra minha movimentação. A partir que eu estabeleço uma distância, que eu noto, que tá na minha amplitude de ação, eu, eu não me recordo de ficar escutando nada, audição não é uma coisa que me, que me, que me pega. Eu fico muito prestando atenção na altura do plexo do oponente, porque eu tento pegar a atitude dele com os braços e com as pernas. Quando eu estabeleço meu campo de ação, minha distância adequada, etc, o que eu tento fazer agora é induzir o meu oponente a fazer o movimento que me coloca numa posição de vantagem. Então, normalmente, uma finta. Então, eu estabeleço um ritmo de movimentação, que faz com que, vamos dizer assim, eu induzo ele a achar que ele pegou meu movimento pra ele [...] Eu tento fazer com que ele erre no movimento que ele faça. E aí eu entro, pode ser com um ashibarai, pode ser um mawashi geri, pode ser um gyakutsuki, pode ser um kizamitsuki, vai depender muito da posição que ele estiver (K4).

¹⁰ depois que você ou leva, ou dá o primeiro golpe, ou você recebe o ponto ou você faz o ponto, aí pronto, você já começa a relaxar mais e a luta sai melhor (K11).

¹¹ Eu gosto sempre de tá me antecipando, ao que ele vai fazer, já tenho em mente qual a minha ideia de golpe. Eu acho que, nem sempre, é possível, né? Mas, quando, quando dá (K6).

¹² Mas você tem que ver que o Karatê, ele não é uma luta que você não vai trocar socos com o adversário. O Karatê é pra definir em um golpe, né? (K11)

¹³ Onde eu vejo buraco, eu consigo, sem precisar pensar naquilo [...] Porque é o meu golpe confiante (K9).



movements while they were trying to initially learn them, but subsequently they also needed to learn not to think about them. This then enables the fighter to act and react without thinking, as it is based on this previous training (Wacquant, 1989).

In capoeira the practitioners described the ritual that preceded the beginning of the fight, in which they: (1) organized themselves in the *roda*, thus forming the shape of a circle. Some of them played the instruments (the most important one is known as *berimbau*), while others sang and clapped their hands and most of them do it while waiting for their turn to fight. The music itself signals the beginning of the fight and it continues until the end of the *roda*. When the *roda* is organized, several fights sequentially appeared in the middle of the circle, always respecting an order as the *roda* only contained one fight at a time. To initiate a fight, two of them (2) go near the main musical instrument, the *berimbau*; (3) they both squat; and (4) they compliment one another and start fighting, moving their bodies towards the centre of the circle. The capoeiristas emphasised how this organization formed a part of an intense experience of preparing themselves to fight, once everyone is able to see each other, in the same rhythm:

It's a fight of questions and answers. [...] I think capoeira is very rich in this aspect. It's a roda, which involves not only the two fighters, but also people who are participating, playing the instruments, they are singing, clapping hands... So, it's a fight that involves not only the two fighters in the centre but the whole group, the whole roda. Then there's this sense... it's a fight and at the same time it's a way to socialize, to make the colleague also participate¹⁴ (C4).

When it comes to the experience of being inside the *roda*, the capoeiristas described a very intense and communitarian atmosphere. It is a way of being together, fully in the “right here/ right now” (Valério & Barreira, 2016a), feeling the capoeira, along with the music. According to Downey (2002), in capoeira “music typically occurs in the social context of the *roda*; but even more importantly, the practitioner's body carries the imprint, gestures, and anticipation of others' bodies. The sensing body itself is a social product” (p. 504). However, Downey also draws attention to the cultural patterns of embodiment in capoeira – which are strongly attached to the music:

The *roda* is a space as well as an event. Spatially, bodies of spectators, of adepts waiting their own chances to play, and musicians, themselves practitioners form a circle to enclose the game, to contain it, and, according to capoeira's oral history, to conceal the practice from persecuting authorities. Temporally, the *roda* is an acoustical event, framed by musical landmarks. Sound informs players when to start and stop their matches and how to play, and ties all participants into the ongoing sequence of games as successive pairs of players enter the space (p. 491).

While we were recording the interview, one of the practitioners heard the sound of the *berimbau*. At that moment, prompted by the music, he started to describe his feelings, and it seemed his body wanted to go there and start fighting, even though the interview was taking place at a distance from the *roda*, to avoid interference from the other participants:

Now you are interviewing me and I am listening to the berimbau over there and I am listening... it's when the magic is released, isn't it?

E: And you start to get involved to...?

C6: Yes, absolutely! It's like you're, in this interview, inside the roda. [...] The music is a key to capoeira in which through the music you move, you show the true essence of the culture, right? Because it's the music that gives you all the directions to history, to the feeling, of slavery times...¹⁵

¹⁴ É uma luta de perguntas e respostas, né? [...] eu acho que a Capoeira, ela é muito rica nesse sentido. De como é uma, é uma roda, é um círculo, né, que não envolve só dois lutadores, né, tem as pessoas que tão participando de, de, tão tocando os instrumentos, tão cantando, tão batendo palma, né? Então, é uma luta que acaba não sendo apenas de dois participantes, né, então ela envolve todo o grupo, todo o círculo. Então, ela, esse sentido, ela é, é uma luta, e, ao mesmo tempo, é uma forma de, de socializar, né, de fazer o próximo, também, o seu companheiro participar (C4).

¹⁵ Nesse momento, que você ta me entrevistando, eu to ouvindo lá o berimbau, eu to ouvindo... que é onde solta a, todo, toda a magia ne?



Downey (2002) has also discussed the way that hearing the *berimbau* moves the capoeiristas and “gets in their blood”, not only making them eager to play it but also turning the game to a faster or a slower one, as well as changing its tonalities (being more aggressive or more playful, for example). Similar to Downey’s observations, another practitioner in this study explained the importance of the music beyond simply making the fight start. It seems the music is also supposed to guide their bodies and lead the rhythm of the entire fight:

I played Benguela and they needed to incorporate Benguela. When I played São Bento Regional, they needed to incorporate São Bento Regional. The ordinary man, who’s not a capoeirista, to see things clearly, he must say “see, this play is different from that one” [smiles]. Then, once you make an ordinary man to understand that Benguela is different from São Bento Regional, then you’re connected to capoeira [...] That’s why the rhythm is so important. And capoeira is unique, the only fight, the only martial art which is connected to music like this¹⁶ (C7).

The above explanation highlights that most of the components of capoeira are not comprehended through verbal language alone. There is a process of allowing the body to be connected with the music, the rhythm, the other’s intentions, etc. and to let the so-called “play of questions and answers” start. The fight only begins and develops through the music. To Valério and Barreira (2016b), it is the music that connects those who are fighting, as an affective element in the *roda*. When we identify these different ways of being connected to the music and to the *roda*, Downey (2002) argues that:

(it) can fluctuate between artistic cooperation and violent conflict, dance and combat, theatre and sport, the ludic and the agonistic, often in response to changes in music. At times, the interaction between two players resembles athletic sparring, even brawling. [...] More importantly, however, a capoeirista strives to demonstrate “malícia”: “cunning” or “savvy” that might manifest itself as humour, technical virtuosity, deceptiveness, the ability to anticipate another’s actions, a superior command of the space, a sense of the dramatic, or even malicious opportunism. [...] players strive to perform beautifully, interpret the music, respond in imaginative, unexpected ways to an opponent’s moves, and use ritual, humour, and drama to enhance the performance (p. 491).

In line with the above argument, an account from one of the capoeiristas who participated in this study provides an illustrative example of the *malícia* and the attempt to control the opponent and the space. It highlights that when a capoeirista enters in the *roda* to fight, he/she intends to hide his/her game, as a part of the combat performance:

we don’t show the fight, as we are in a cage; there, you show off automatically your game. Not in capoeira. You see it and you keep getting it. The fight is a surprise, it comes. Not immediately, it is a surprise¹⁷ (C6).

Furthermore, the capoeirista above, spontaneously compared capoeira and MMA, claiming that capoeira does not have the purpose of showing what the fighter knows or intends to do, while

E: E você já começa a ficar mexido pra...?

C6: É, com certeza. É como se você tivesse, nessa entraveista, é como se você tivesse dentro da roda, ne? [...] É, a música é a, é uma, uma peça, assim, entendeu, a peça-chave, assim, da, da capoeira, onde, através dela, onde você se manifesta, aonde você mostra a essência mesmo da, da cultura ne? Porque a música é que vai te dar toda a direção da história, do sentimento, da época dos escravos mesmo.

¹⁶ Aí, eu tocava a banguela, e eles tinham que incorporar a banguela. Quando eu tocava São Bento Grande Regional, eles tinham que incorporar São Bento Grande Regional. E o leigo tem que, não é o capoeirista, pra, pra coisa ficar clara, o leigo tem que dizer: “Ó, aquele jogo é diferente daquele” [sorri]. Então, a partir do momento em que você faz um leigo entender que a banguela é uma coisa e o São Bento Grande Regional é outra, aí sim, aí você tá conectado com a capoeira. [...] Por isso que o ritmo é importante. E a capoeira é a única, a única luta, a única arte marcial que tem essa coisa da música (C7).

¹⁷ A gente não mostra logo a luta, do que você subir no ringue, né, subir no ringue ali, você já vai logo mostrar, automaticamente, vai ver logo a luta ali. A Capoeira, não. Você vai olhando ela, você entendendo, entendendo. A luta, ela é uma surpresa, ela vem, entendeu? Ela não vem imediato, é uma surpresa (C6).

MMA would be more attached to the performance aspects. In this study, MMA fighters reported the need to present and to prove their abilities to the audience.

In contrast to karate and capoeira, the descriptions of the beginning of the fight by MMA practitioners appeared to have some distinct features. Overall, and unlike in karate and capoeira, the strategy in an MMA fight depends on an anticipated contest, with a set opponent, agreed in advance. Thus, the MMA practitioner's preparation is more intense, taking place over several weeks before the event itself. It seems the combat has already started even before we are able to clearly see it, as is illustrated by the description below:

It's like, every day, when I make the agreements to fight, for example... I will fight within three months, it's gonna be my next fight. Then I can't live anything in these three months which is not involved with the fight¹⁸ (M10).

Normally, MMA fighters train for a specific fight, which is to say that even when sparring in training, they are focused on the upcoming event. This is significantly different from karate and capoeira because even if we focus on competitive fighting, only MMA fighters reported knowing who the opponent would be weeks or months before the fight.

Thus, we can understand the beginning of a MMA fight as a successive intensification process, which includes (1) scheduling the fight, when the fighter learns who their opponent will be and start the *camp*, a name used to the period of specific trainings and strategies, usually a few months or weeks before the fighting day); (2) the weigh-in, a day before the event; (3) the cage entrance:

I think entering in the octagon is a feeling that only who enters there may know it. It's like entering in a place which closes as a cage and you're in front of a man you've never seen. Sometimes you don't know about his capacity – technical nor physical. Then it's a huge challenge, it's a feeling of fear and courage at the same time there¹⁹ (M4).

When asked: "How is the experience of fighting MMA for you?", the fighter, whose account is quoted above, stopped talking for a while, looked at the horizon with a smile on his face, swore, and then started to answer to the question. The beginning of the fight is understood as a period of mixed feelings: adrenaline, anxiety, fear, but also courage and happiness. This was common among accounts of the MMA fighters' experiences of entering in the octagon to fight. These results appear to be similar to findings by Jensen, Roman, Shaft and Wrisberg (2013), who asked the fighters about the experience of a MMA combat, from 30 minutes before it starts all the way to its completion. While we chose to focus on both competition and training fights, and theirs focused purely on the moments of competition, the findings in this study appeared to be consistent with those of the mentioned (Jensen et al, 2013), particularly when it came to the experience of entering the cage:

They described the world inside the cage as clearly distinct from the one outside the cage. Cage reality consisted of danger and ambiguity that could rapidly alter the course of the fight and produce sudden victory or defeat. Lower-order themes associated with the higher-order theme of cage reality included unique, unpredictable, and physically extreme (Jensen et al, p. 4).

It appears that the fighters in this study shared some similarities with the above study (Jensen et al, 2013) in describing the octagon entrance as an ambiguous, intense experience, with "mixed feelings":

¹⁸ É como se, todos os meus dias, quando eu fecho uma luta, por exemplo, vou fechar uma luta daqui a três meses, posteriormente, vai ser minha próxima luta, eu não consigo viver nada nesses três meses, que não seja voltado praquela luta (M10).

¹⁹ Acho que entrar no octagon é uma sensação que só quem entra sabe como que é, tipo você entrar e um lugar que tipo fecha um jaulão e você tá na frente de um cara que você nunca viu, às vezes, não sabe da capacidade técnica e física do cara. Então assim é um desafio tremendo assim, é uma sensação de medo e coragem ao mesmo tempo ali (M4).



Something which was really remarkable was the effect to go out in front of all those people and the intimacy of people with you. You wave to the people when you're entering. As you wave, they shout at you. Some you can hear, but others you can't. And you try to stay focused in the fight, but that moment is really big. The song you chose is being played, right? So it's a very big moment, it's growing, like, it's burning inside you²⁰ (M7).

The quote above demonstrates the significance of the supporters as well as the song which is played at the entrance moment, as they walk toward the octagon, in the MMA practitioners' descriptions of starting a fight. These features characterize MMA as a fight which is organized as a spectacle of sporting entertainment (Downey, 2006; Sanchez-Garcia & Malcolm, 2010). The descriptions of the moment they entered the cage, were characterized by the cheering from the audience, by the loud music and the strong light-effects. It seems, not only the fight itself matters, but also the way it is seen by and presented to (and with) the audience. It appears to be a spectacle with a fight at the centre of it. This could be related to what Queval (2008) discusses on the practice of contemporary sports: the competitions are more common, as well as more spectacular. In addition, the athletes need to do their best to achieve a maximum performance, as it is a "celebration of the effort" (p. 193). It is not only about training to win, but to be prepared in the most effective way possible; in MMA, to present to the audience the best fight they can.

These discussions regarding sport and entertainment in contemporary times are of particular relevance to MMA because it opens possibilities to combined different modalities into a hybrid form of combat, making its defining boundaries less rigid in comparison to traditional MA&CS modalities (Downey, 2006; Heilbron and Van Bottenburg, 2007; 2010; Spencer, 2009). Consequently, in this context, according to the participants, the beginning of the fight is closely related to intense experiences of preparatory training and of a performance that is to be presented to the audience, to the opponent and to the media. These included practices such as trash talking (Barreira, 2014), an insulting or provocative speech purposefully intended to intimidate the opponent.

4. How the body starts to move: from perception to the beginning of the fight in karate, capoeira and MMA

The findings presented here illustrate that, karate, capoeira and MMA practitioners described their lived experiences of the beginning of a fight in different ways. Their descriptions seemed to vary depending to their respective life histories, the specificities of their particular modality and the methods of training and/or competition. Despite these differences, it was nonetheless possible to discern some distinct structures pertaining to starting a fight within each modality, that were closely related to historical and cultural issues within MA&CS.

Karate and capoeira practitioners appear to be more attached to the present moment of the combat when describing the start of a fight. They did not choose their strategy before the fight started, instead this happened in different ways, depending on the specific features of these modalities'. For example, in karate, we could observe the influence of a traditional Eastern philosophy in the process of starting a fight. Respect was always important, not only on an individual level (the karateka must bow the opponent several times and wait for the judge to start fighting), but also in terms of their embodied positioning: he/she needed to obtain the right distance from the opponent's body to start fighting. The fight had to be controlled and precise, as the karateka waits for the best moment to attack. However, some interviewees also described their attempt to utilise their "trusted hit": trying to land a perfect strike.

Much like in karate, in capoeira, there is also a ritual element to starting a fight, but in capoeira it is closely connected to Brazilian colonial history. It seems the *roda* protects the

²⁰ E uma coisa que foi bem marcante foi o efeito que teve sair pra esse tanto de pessoas e a proximidade das pessoas com você, você cumprimenta as pessoas, quando você tá entrando. Conforme você vai cumprimentando as pessoas, elas vão gritando coisas pra você, umas você ouve, umas você não ouve. E você tentando focar na luta, mas aquele momento é muito grande. É um momento muito grande. Tá tocando a sua música que você escolheu, né? Então, é um momento muito grande, vai crescendo, assim, vai fervendo isso dentro de você (M7).

capoeiristas from the others (non-practitioners), transforming it into a space in which they all pertain to the same group, participating in the fight in different ways (fighting in the middle, or playing, singing, clapping hands, etc.). Their experiences show how the *roda* allows them to feel equal, and to experience a sense of collectivity (Valério & Barreira, 2016b). This feeling of “togetherness” plays an important role in the process of starting a capoeira fight. The beginning of a capoeira fight also contains ways of concealing the hits, pretending it is only a dance or a game, even though the fight is the primary intention. In addition, the way to be in the *roda* is always intertwined with the music which is being played.

In contrast to capoeira and karate, in MMA, the beginning of the fight took place weeks or months before a specific combat is settled. This is the period when all training is related to the upcoming combat. The intensity of this experience reaches its peak at the moment of entering the cage, with the “mixed feelings” and the “roller coaster” of sensations, discussed previously. In addition, the fighters reported the ambivalence that characterised these moments, as they have spent weeks or months anticipating it with excitement, but they also fear it. The practitioners accounts also highlight the nature of MMA fights as spectacles where the beginning of the fight characterized by media hype, cheering audience, loud music and spotlights on the fighters. The fighters are there not only to win, but to produce and exciting performance the best they can.

Despite these differences, there are also some shared features across karate, capoeira and MMA. First, there is the presence of a ritual component in all three of them, although it is played out in different ways as we have illustrated above. This seems to echo Csordas’ (1993) discussions on somatic modes of attention regarding the way in which some positions and movements of the body are culturally elaborated. In addition, most of the fighters in all three modalities mentioned how they were not able to see the opponent accurately when they were initiating the fight, moving towards their opponent. According to Merleau-Ponty (1953/2011):

I was already in space (= situated) before every particular perception from the space, I was already tangled in space. I see the contours = not as a “visual object”, but as an implication of a future action and the perception in a presence, modulation of a body gear²¹ (p. 82)

The relevance of this to the present enquiry is, to grasp how a fighter is able to move towards the opponent without seeing them? Through Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (1953/2011), we can understand how this happens as the practitioner is always able to perceive some contours which can enable and modulate their movement. This entanglement to the space and to the perception of the other as a presence is primary, while elaborating a whole object to be seen requires more time, and it also seems an impossible task, as our body always chooses to pay attention to a specific part (Merleau-Ponty, 1953/2011). Then, when identifying some contours which may enable the movement, the fighter perceives the other’s body and moves towards it. As an example, as one karateka noted:

I don’t remember hearing anything, (there is) a lot of vision, a lot of body perception, peripheral vision. Sometimes you don’t see the attack, but your body moves. You’re not looking to that member, but you go to a specific direction. So I don’t remember exactly how this happens, but it’s a fact²² (K4).

It is important to highlight that the fighter does not see the attack; he/she responds to spatial perception of the movement, its contours. Downey (2002) argues drawing on Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000) that this is present in some elements in capoeira, such as the *malícia*, also considered as “cunning” or “savvy”. If he/she waits the whole attack to complete to defend it, it would not be possible to do so; once the attack ends, the defence becomes irrelevant. This has also

²¹ Original sentence : “J’étais déjà spatial (= situé) avant toute perception particulière de l’espace, j’étais déjà engrené sur l’espace. Je vois le relief = non comme “donné e visuelle”, mais comme implication d’un devenir d’action et de perception dans une présence, modulation d’un engrenage corporel”.

²² eu não me lembro de audição, muita visão, muita percepção corpórea, muita visão periférica. Às vezes, você não vê o golpe, mas seu corpo se mexe, você não tá olhando praquele membro, mas você sai pra uma direção. Então, eu não, eu não me lembro bem exatamente como isso acontece, mas é fato (K4).



been observed by Wacquant (1989) who stated: “during the fight, there is no time to think, we must simply react”. In this sense, acting is always understood to be faster than conscious awareness of the action. According to Gallagher (2005),

As one’s conscious attention is directed towards one’s body, there usually takes place a discrimination or isolation of the outstanding bodily feature defined by the circumstance. In such experience, the body becomes consciously articulated into parts, although the isolated bodily feature or part continues to function only in relation to the rest of the body, which may not be the object of conscious attention. A body image often involves a partial, abstract, and articulated representation of the body in so far as attention, thought, and emotional evaluation attend to only one part or area of aspect of the body at a time (p. 29).

The above illustrates that, a part of one’s body is chosen as an object of attention, which enables the movement (Gallagher, 2005); in the case illustrated by our findings, it enables the body to start fighting, as something (or somebody) in the environment/situation calls the fighter to act, for example a kick or a punch can trigger the defence reaction. Consequently, in line with Gallagher (2006), and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2000, 1953/2011), our findings indicate that across these three modalities: (1) there is no random attack nor random movement, as it is always related to a specific part of the opponents’ corporal action and tied to a specific situation; (2) consciousness is different from awareness, because a subject can have embodied awareness of something even if they are not conscious of it. As previously discussed, we propose that the reflection on unreflecting acts (Barbaras, 2008) is relevant to understanding how the body moves with no, or very little time to think. This latter has also been mentioned within the existing body of MA&CS literature (Hogeveen, 2011; Vaittinen, 2017; Wacquant, 1989).

On the other hand, in relation to the process of starting a fight, which is in focus here, the body knows what to do because act here is understood as an intentional act, as traditionally developed by phenomenology. This is founded on the assumption that to initiate action implies perceiving and responding to a constant relation between body and world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000). This is possible due to the phenomenological understanding of habit, described as, movements and acts which have become or have been made familiar to the body (Hogeveen, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000; Wacquant, 1989). It is important to note that this process is not automatic, instead, it is acquired, guided by intentionality and experienced through our corporeality, that is always tied to the world, situated in a specific space and time (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000, 1953/2011).

We summarise that to start fighting requires an ability acquired through experience developed into a habit (Hogeveen, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2000; Spencer, 2009; Wacquant, 1989). Therefore, the above frame of reference in which the body chooses the best way to respond to the world without the need for prior conscious consideration of the action, is particularly relevant for comprehending the process of starting a fight in karate, capoeira and MMA.

5. Conclusion

The findings presented in this paper provide insights into understanding the process of starting a fight within these three modalities of combat and thus contributes to the existing body of literature on MA&CS and phenomenologically guided studies on embodiment and physical culture (including MA&CS) which has emerged and significantly developed in the recent decade (Andrieu, 2017; Barreira, 2013, 2017a; Bassetti, Telles & Barreira, 2016; Hogeveen, 2011; Spencer, 2009; Telles & Barreira, 2016; Vaittinen, 2017). Furthermore, it also contributes to studies on MA&CS within the field of sport psychology and therefore it could also inform the perspective of professionals, not only sport psychologists, but also coaches and athletes, for example.

In the field of sports psychology, specifically in relation to MA&CS, future investigations may consider this comprehension of the process of starting a fight and seek to develop and eventually integrate it into some practices regarding basic psychological processes such as anxiety, attention and concentration management for MA&CS practitioners, for instance. Overall, the present study could also contribute to existing work on learning processes, in MA&CS pedagogy, which have so far

been examined in several MA&CS contexts (Downey, 2005; Hogeeven, 2011; Spencer, 2009; Vaittinen, 2017; Wacquant, 1989) in terms of expanding the understanding of the main features that help the body to move towards a specific way of fighting.

Possible future directions for research include the comprehension and comparisons of the fighting experience as a whole, understanding the perception and the movement of the fighters in karate, capoeira and MMA. Further investigations around fighting experiences in comparison with situations, such as the duel, in the context of the self-defence and the brawl (Barreira, 2017) would also extend our understanding of the process of starting a fight beyond these three modalities. Finally, future studies could also consider the utilisation of the phenomenological approach in exploring not only other MA&CS modalities but also different embodied practices.

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